

Breathing Spaces in Neoliberal Places

An Essay Review of Peter Taubman's *Teaching By Numbers*

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IN HIS LATEST BOOK, *Teaching By Numbers: Deconstructing the Discourse of Standards and Accountability in Education*, Peter Taubman (2009) casts a net far, deep, and wide in an attempt to meticulously map the influential players who robustly work to inscribe an audit culture of standards and accountability in the field of education. Drawing upon his broad range of professional experiences – a high school English teacher; a professor and former assistant dean in a teacher education program; a founding member and consultant for a small, restructured high school; and a scholar in the area of psychoanalysis and curriculum theory – Taubman does a seldom seen feat of funneling from the outer reaches of the educational discipline to the psychic intimacies of teacher practice while, at the same time, providing diligent attention to the instrumental place of discourse, language, and ideology. Lit by his professional and conceptual insight, he traces the intricate networks of the educational establishment in order to explain just how penetrating the standards and evaluation movement has become, presenting with great specificity the direct relationships among educators, politicians, policy makers, journalists, media pundits, and the business sector, who all seem wrangled together within a knowledge-based economy that privileges private venturing into the public sectors of education.

But what I believe makes his work wholly unique is not only the breadth from which Taubman approaches the looming and ubiquitous nature of present-day standards and accountability, but the ways in which he examines *how* and *why* such systems of surveillance and control have become accepted, even invited, into the work of classroom teachers and students. Clearly committed to the welfare of teachers and teacher educators, he avoids the banal trappings of teacher versus No Child Left Behind, and instead, describes an all-encompassing transformation that first, frames a chaotic reality where the public school teacher is blameworthy and incapable, and second, capitalizes on their ripened vulnerabilities to then offer the policies of the global free market as a concrete and certain solution. This political spectacle, as Murray Edelman (1988) once wrote to explain the war on drugs, is the construction of a social problem as a means to both rationalize and secure the political and economic status quo. In this case, education is transformed into a viable service and site for profiteering. Under the guise of democracy and liberation, public theaters of disorientation are staged (Klein, 2007) with faulty

illusions that governments have the natural duty to establish and support corporate allies and commission their self-interests.

There is no better example of this than the recent documentary by Lesley Chilcott and David Guggenheim (2010), “Waiting for ‘Superman,’” as it follows Taubman’s analysis almost flawlessly: 1) construct and disperse a social crisis; 2) condemn teachers as the new failures; 3) induce anxiety by leveraging public resources; 4) standardize and control curriculum; and 5) open up the public-sector playing field to free-market, for-profit, venture capitalists, and their beneficiaries. As a result, learning is fundamentally reduced to discrete tasks, aims, and objectives, measured and assessed through behavior control and management, partly rooted within military psychologies that target inherent vulnerabilities within education. This locked-in design is then substantiated by streamlined tactics and the widespread dissemination of faulty data reports, such as the publicized teacher rankings in the L.A. Times (August 20, 2010) which named and shamed 6,000 teachers in math and reading along a spectrum of less than to most effective; notwithstanding a blatant disregard for expert arguments against the efficacy of value-added measures. Let us not forget that lives were lost in this aftermath.¹

At the Grading the Teachers: Measures, Media and Policies Conference (J. Felch, M. Wilson, E. Hanushek, R. Rothstein, S. Rasky, & D. Plank, September, 2010) at UC Berkeley last September, statisticians debated the flaws of value-added regression models which use five independent variables to predict Y, or student test scores. These include previous test scores, school contexts such as demographics or parent’s schooling levels, school practices, classroom context including number of ELL and disruptive students present, and of course, the teacher value added indicator. Unanimously, all panelists agreed that this model discounts interaction amongst variables; failing to remove factors beyond a teacher’s control; assuming that teachers have the same value regardless of their students -- or the setting, or the year, or the day for that matter -- and carrying significant errors due to the statistical uncontrollability of its factors. Value-added measures, as we all know, cannot measure what a teacher actually teaches nor does it account for the inconsistencies between curricular standards and their associated exams, such as the absurdity of measuring paragraph coherency with multiple choice exams. Value-added models do not take in consideration horizontal variation, including home circumstances, sudden illness, or differences in test taking conditions, nor is it sensitive to vertical scaling which would recognize that each grade level cannot be measured uniformly due to developmental differences. As remarked by Mark Wilson, Professor of Policy, Organization, and Measurement at UC Berkeley, this analysis would be similar to using temperature degrees to predict individual comfortability. The two cannot be assumed equal.

By reconstituting social disparities into disaggregated test scores, a critical examination of structural inequality, poverty, injustice, and racism is conveniently elided and teachers and students are now held responsible for overcoming historically-rooted disadvantages on their own in what I consider a clear-cut display of American rugged individualism. Working the myths of the meritocracy, satisfaction is gained, according to former Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, when every child regardless of race and income can read and do math uniformly at grade level. This, cites Taubman, is an aim with logical impossibility. If grade level means average performance of students in any given grade level, a random sample will always result in half of students below grade level benchmarks. This sort of haphazard thinking creates yet another layer of anger and frustration for those interested in preserving an education that is, in the words of Taubman, “attentive to the nuances of meaning, to the beauty of the idiosyncratic, to the variegated hues of experience” (p. 52).

I find respite in Nicholas Lemann's (September 27, 2010) article in the *New Yorker* that reminds us that the world's first system of universal public K-12 education and of mass higher education is one of the great achievements of American democracy, and that we now have 50 million Americans, about a sixth of the population, enrolled in public schools. As one of the world's most ethnically diverse and decentralized systems, we must expect messiness, redundancy, conflicting goals and knowing this, the narrative of failure and crisis seems as odds with the realities of our accomplishments. Thousands across the globe look to American education as a reliable and worthy opportunity, leaving families and loved ones, sometimes enduring dangerous conditions, to make attendance here. Claiming that the crisis is overstated, he warns us that any attempt to overthrow an entire large-scale, decentralized system must be met with careful consideration and any simple solution that heroically claims to remediate its complications must be met with diligent skepticism.

Yet, control after crisis is a tactic clearly evident in a speech on teacher preparation and policy by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (2009) this last October at Teachers College, Columbia. Expounding upon phrases such as "the education that millions of Americans got in the past simply won't do"; "the limited opportunities in a competitive global economy"; "still far from achieving that dream of equal educational opportunity," Duncan began by first framing the tribulations resultant from mediocrity in education, strategically outlining the deficiencies of education and its failure to produce global competitors. Subsequently, he moved into a well-disputed and controversial study that discounted the role of socio-economic status in learning, proclaiming that it is "not socioeconomic status and not family background, but the quality of the teacher in front of that class" that obstructs or enables success in schools. These arguments, as previously mentioned, not only dangerously defer attention away from the rampant social disadvantages present within context, but concomitantly work to position teachers as wholly responsible for the overwhelming task of its amelioration.

Although this speech was given after the publication of *Teaching By Numbers*, the uncanny parallels between what Duncan claims are critical and the heartfelt frustrations outlined by Taubman are remarkably, if not unfortunately, similar. By constructing a condition of inadequacy and naming the problem as one of teacher preparation and quality, "unruly and disordered," Duncan proclaimed to an assembled crowd that "recruiting and preparing this Army of great new teachers depends heavily on the nation's colleges of education," again resting sole responsibility in the tied hands of teacher educators who are increasingly pressured and monitored by accreditation boards and regulatory administrations. Referring to a study by Arthur Levine (2006), he concluded that education "lacked empirical evidence of what worked in preparing teachers for an outcome-based education system," then unsurprisingly introduced a resolution, one based on greater accountability through standards and assessment, praising the field for their fiscal investment in these types of empirical measures, drawing direct and oversimplified correlations between teacher quality and student performance, and then lauding the management of these outcomes through monetary incentives or public humiliation. "A single-minded focus" as Duncan so proudly declared. This is the urgent educational context Taubman seeks to explore, the extraordinarily streamlined effort that has changed the course of the nation, entrenching all its members, both physically and psychologically, into a self-regulating system of numeritization, operationalization, and rationalization.

Taubman's book is recursively layered, providing first a descriptive overview of the auditing culture that has become public transcript within the current system of schooling. In this vein, he begins with chapters that extend upon the discourse of corporatization and focuses on four

formidable aspects of the current education market: 1) the testing regime, 2) the language of the learning sciences, 3) the system of public surveillance and discipline, and 4) the psychic seduction of and consequential investment in neoliberal policies and practices. This he does through a comprehensive and scrupulous review of practices forwarded by the federal government, the corporate sector, higher education and teacher preparation programs, educational organizations, non-profits, commissions, councils, and foundations. Taubman's mind-spinning web of hidden affiliations, mostly established outside the public domain, is at once frightening and disconsolate.

Moreover, found throughout Taubman's book is an impressive array of concrete examples and excerpts from data reports, student and teacher examinations, mission statements, media, publications, lectures, and academic scholarship, all of which provides much needed substance in understanding the rhetorical mechanisms and political intentions of those who carry policy-making power in education. Upon reading, one would be hard pressed to find even the most informed of individuals not shocked by some of the statements Taubman has so diligently researched and collected, such as Spellings declaration, "It's become a favorite refrain of mine, 'What gets measured, gets done'" (p. 60). Even further, Taubman delves deeply and attentively into the language itself, at times dissecting line by line in order to understand the hidden messages and implicit meanings embedded within written and orated passages from key leaders. "What is crucial to note, is how monotonous the language becomes after a while, how it ceases to hold one's attention, and yet how, when it is used again and again, it seems to offer a sense of action, of control" (p. 75), states Taubman, as he deconstructs the quotidian appropriation of certain terms, cautioning against their haphazard deployment and the common disregard for the historical contexts from which they arise. Two examples of this are the divergent use of the term 'neoliberalism' by conservatives, liberals, libertarians, neoconservatives, and self-proclaimed neoliberals, and the divergent meaning of 'standards,' more specifically 'content standards,' 'performance standards,' and 'opportunity-to-learn standards.' Additionally, Taubman goes on to discuss the etymological meaning of the very word 'standard' and how it has become deceptively appropriated to signify equity, fairness, and consistency while concomitantly creating and sustaining hierarchies of social inequity and differential power.

Suffice it to say that Taubman's examination of the current educational enterprise, including his focus on the rhetorical and disciplinary arsenal used to ensure resultant policies and practices should be a mainstay requisite for any course on teacher education and policy, his discussion of how and why teachers colluded with the very accountability measures they sought to resist is particularly interesting and merits added attention. In the final chapters of his book, he turns to the complicity of educators and provides four possible reasons why resistance against the standardization of teaching was not effectively fulfilled. He names these as: the fear of chaos and loss of resources in the classroom; the sense of shame and low status of teachers within the profession; fantasies of heroism and self-sacrifice; and the melancholic loss of idealism and its replacement with practicality.

In the chapter entitled, "The Seduction of a Profession," Taubman explores the various means through which fear has become instilled within the work of teachers and teacher educators. Besides the natural nervousness around classroom management, low monetary compensation, and the stresses of being a successful teacher, Taubman argues that in urban schools, minoritized² youth have become fictionally constructed as violent and aggressive perpetrators who are then responded to as common criminals within and outside their schooling institutions. This media-spurred perception, coupled with the anxieties of teaching, has even

further amplified the sense of fear among teachers, who may in turn reconstitute disciplinary control in terms of monitoring academic achievement. Desperately seeking security, teachers may embrace the language and policies of certainty, insecure of their own capacities to fulfill the expectations laid upon them, fearful to repeat the failures publically broadcasted by figures such as their very own Secretary of Education, and driven by this lack of faith in themselves and other educators, find themselves turning to the perceived expertise of the business world. About this he writes, “The fantasy that classroom success lies in ‘best practices’ can defend paradoxically against the fear that one’s own interests are not enough to form a curriculum or against feelings of aggression towards the students or a sense of insignificance” (p. 147). Maybe this is the turn Duncan referred to in his speech when he highlighted a survey that seemed to prove teachers as wanting to be “taught how to use data to differentiate and improve instruction and boost student learning,” and the uneasy laughter he claimed to have heard when inquiring into the quality of their teacher preparation programs, which can also be construed as a self-deprecating lack of faith in own sense of success as educators.

Of course, Taubman would agree that these are possible explanations, not ones of certainty or causal relationship, and so he continues to outline other conditions that may have lured teachers towards their reliance on rational uniformity. Stricken by financial threats from the state government, continues Taubman, teachers find themselves struggling to accomplish the impossible, all the while negotiating an ideological background painted with chaos and disorder. However, at the same time that teachers are publically criticized, Hollywood has taken great liberty in producing movies that fictionalize the heroic teacher as one who miraculously reaches out to kids and changes their world. In the public imaginary, then, teachers are constantly framed in contradictory ways, on the one hand as idiots, failures, and disappointments, and on the other, as saviors and saints. Shame, says Taubman, results from the failure to live up to the ideal image of oneself, in this case, not living up to the responsibility of ensuring the nation’s economic and political wellbeing through the preparation of future competitors in a global market, not living up to keeping our youth out of prison and off welfare, not living up to the media images, not living up to making certain each individual is literate and gainfully employed. In order to regain public trust that these aims can be met through their efforts, it just may be that teachers turn toward proclaimed ‘best’ practices that promise them security of outcome.

With externally-imposed prescriptions for teaching and the threat of external evaluation, it may not be so difficult to understand why educators desire approval from the regulatory agencies that argue to know how to best teach teachers how to teach students. This frantic search for ‘best’ practices, argues Taubman, has replaced the core being of the individual as a teacher, their freedoms, their curiosities, their passions and interests, replaced now by their complicity to an audit regime many of them claim to detest. Furthermore, grandiose expectations laid upon teachers have led to a litany of narratives on “sacrifice, salvation, and rescue” (p. 145), where the magnanimous teacher serves unselfishly and commits wholly to the student who remains at the core of the entire educational endeavor. Coupled with increased accountability and measurement, these narratives lead to a hollowing out of the teacher, a neglect of any inner life or subjective desire or experience or psyche, a construction of the teacher as a passive and empty liaison between the neoliberal corporate demand and the impressionable student. Thus, we see here a manipulation, one that exploits the fears of teachers, induces shame at their inadequacy, then seduces them with the image of a sacrificial martyr, none of which respects, honors, or nurtures their lived personage, their flaws, their desires, not to mention their intellectual and creative capacities as educators.

Before embarking on my extension to Taubman's work, there is one other point he makes on the deconstruction of the educational discourse that relates to the teacher as a central embodiment of its manifestations. This involves a teacher's melancholic loss of idealism, specifically the lost ideals of racial integration and economic equity, which work to intensify the allure of standards and accountability. Psychoanalytically informed, Taubman proceeds to explain how the loss of one's ideals induces on an unconscious or partly conscious level, a self-berating activity which derives satisfaction from its own suffering. Driven by a sense of guilt, attached to a repression of anger and hatred over a lost love or ideal, the subject, in this case the teacher, turns toward their dependence on the law which offers them discipline and punishment. To illustrate, Taubman suggests that even while schools are more segregated than any time before *Brown versus Board*, the vanishing language of racial equity and integration, refashioned into achievement gaps and equality of exam scores, has led to the loss of an ideal and the reconstitution of testing as a means to social equality. The disparate hierarchy of socioeconomic status, which has always been tied to racial injustice in the United States, has now become unproven in its significance to raising test scores. It has now become a non-issue.

Taubman's work is thorough and comprehensive in his attempt to understand the strongholds of education as a transformation towards a rationalized uniformity that then invites corporate control over teachers and curriculum. For educators on a multitude of levels, horizontal and vertical, this text serves in the very least as a brimming reserve of information for those who desire to understand the intimate affiliations among education, policy-makers, politicians, and the business world. But, it seems that Taubman's contribution centers about questions of teacher complicity, the possible explanations of their collusion, and how to reclaim a sense of dignity in the face of exasperating circumstance. After painting the current situation in which many educators find themselves struggling, Taubman leaves the reader with an honest and bittersweet address, suggesting that "we must first be willing to let go of our attachments to practices and discourses that participate, even form ostensibly opposing position, in the logics, language, and practices of standards and accountability" (p. 201). Admitting that his search for breathing space has been left inconclusive, he asks teachers to consider the various ways in which resistance against standards and accountability may be conceived. There is first his example of open resistance and organized protest, then a deconstruction on the level of common senses and ideological persuasions, then an absolute state of refusal to engage the debilitating aspects of the discourse, a resistant withdrawal that lies between the outlined transformation and a critique of the order. Of course, his use of deep psychoanalytical scholarship makes his offerings much more substantial and thought out than summatively outlined in this book review.

Truly, activist movements cannot be forgotten. On premiere night of "Waiting for 'Superman,'" New York City public school teachers banded together strategically placing themselves outside numerous theaters with stickers that read, "Hello, I'm a school teacher. Come talk to me." On October 7th, National Defend Public Education Day, thousands of teachers, parents, and citizens walked from the Harlem State Office Building to City College, one local movement amongst many across the nation. Efforts to defend public education span the globe. In March 2008, teachers in the southern Chinese town of Shenzhen went on strike against the city's decision to privatize preschools. As one of the fastest growing cities in the world and a center for foreign investment, Shenzhen's 22 once publicly run preschools were handed over to the Investment Holdings Corporation, and in response its 400 teachers, rallied together with other concerned citizens and parents invoking visibility by temporarily shutting down the entire system. In Spain, teachers mass picketed outside bus terminals and train stations mobilizing

against massive cuts to education, speaking out against the scapegoating of teachers. “I want to show our government that we, the citizens, are not those to blame for this crisis, and we simply should not have to pay for it,” declared Union General Secretary Carlos Lopez. Last month in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, violence erupted as teachers struggled to preserve their union, defending the privatization of their Teachers’ Savings and Loan and Pension Fund and preventing the passage of the General Law of Education, which among other things removes kindergarten, pre-kindergarten, and high school from public hands, turning them over as private tuition-based institutions. For this, teachers have been gunned down by hooded men in the middle of their classrooms. The impact of these policies on social inequity is frightening. Participation in such protests are risky. Yet the decision to act is nothing short of inspirational. As Audre Lorde (1984) once wrote, “this is not idle fantasy, but a disciplined attention to the true meaning of ‘it feels right to me.’”

We must also understand, however, that in the face of authority, teachers may not publicly protest for fear that outward resistance may lead to the end of their professional career. Yet, many teachers are not, nor would consider themselves, in compliance to the mechanisms of rationalization, surveillance, outcome-based assessment, or standardized curriculum. With this in mind, I would like to illuminate another site of agency, one that offers James Scott’s (1990) notion of public and hidden transcripts, to consider collusion and collision as necessarily caught within the same engaged movement, yet distinct in its affordance of possibility and change. What I mean is that the work of teaching has always had a performative moment, not so much in a theatrical sense, but rather in the ways that teachers and students are perpetually working from and against the discourse of schooling, whether that be visible or less transparent. According to Scott (1989; 1990) public transcripts require a discursive performance by both power holders and subordinates who act out the behaviors and attitudes expected of them, pejoratively upholding “the appearance of harmony in accordance with hegemony” (Baszile, 2005, p. 130).

From under discursive authority and a public transcript that now requires rigid testing and accountability, teachers may not be able to directly resist certain directives without assuming dire consequences. They seem well aware and fearful that outward resistance may lead to the end of their professional career, especially so during this current state of heightened unemployment. Yet knowing that any sense of constraint means that one has already first deliberated upon the concept of freedom, teachers are not in complete compliance to the mechanisms of rationalization, surveillance, outcome-based assessment, or standardized curriculum. The agentive moment arises from the interstices between the public transcript and, what Scott calls the hidden transcript of schooling, the vital spaces in which authority is critiqued and reclaimed, oftentimes offstage, behind closed doors, amongst students and teachers, on the sidelines of conversation, outside faculty meetings, and classroom walls. Typically enacted as a calling on behalf of oneself and one’s loved ones, hidden transcripts are not only performances, but also acts of releasing one’s natural impulses, oftentimes an outpour of rage, violence, and anger against the shareholders of oppression (Gallegos, 2005). Outside the sphere of surveillance, where sanctions on non-conformity are considered of no consequence, teachers reclaim authoritative power, articulate their interpretations, speak differently from and against regulatory agencies, and salvage a sense of dignity, place, and agency, if not in visible protest than perhaps from a burgeoning sense of camaraderie. From my experience, teacher educators are constantly asking where they can create breathing space, how they can carve out possibilities for exploration and curiosity, congregating together with likeminded colleagues to develop and plan what they believe is an ethically and socially responsible education. They express great

frustration and anger, all of which I believe are generative and necessary responses. It is this capacity to reverse or negate the discourse of standards and accountability that provides leverage for those who occupy ranks of lesser political power.

It seems then that while certain forces may proclaim that students only learn when teachers are properly trained in boosting test scores, these notions are constantly reworked by even the most uncritical of educators. The persuasions of standards and accountability may be seductive to many for their simplicity and self-assuredness, yet the ways in which they are resisted, either unwittingly, explicitly, unconsciously, covertly must also be acknowledge side by side with conjectures of teacher collusion. We are all and always acting out of both resistance and compliance to the educational transformations that move us so swiftly. It may be that the ways in which teachers and students act in the public domain is not necessarily the venue in which to understand their intentions or enactments.

Many are such cases where teachers disregard inaccurate test scores when writing report cards or consider a child's recent family tragedy when evaluating academic performance or close the door to discuss a controversial subject not dictated by common standards. These are decisions based on intuition, morality, and understanding. Wrestled from rigid accountability, regulatory threats, and administrative policing, breathing spaces for agency are constantly created, with horizons possibly distant, yet visible enough to dream of education otherwise.

In safe chambers, and sometimes courageously in the public, teaching colleagues, students, and friends will always nurture hope and a vision of education 'otherwise.' Such is not lost. The complexities, the unknowing and unpredictable, the existential encounter, the vicissitudes of subjectivity and the unconscious, the perpetual interplay of resistance and performance continue to remain in the work of teaching. By ending with the venerable words of Peter Taubman himself, his gleam of shining hope amid the nuisance of and melancholia over the course of schooling today, let us remember that "there is no other profession committed to keeping alive among the nation's youth the dying flame of intellectual curiosity and offering perhaps the only public place where the hegemony of the market can be questioned" (p. 140).

Notes

1. <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/sep/28/local/la-me-south-gate-teacher-20100928>
2. 'Minoritized' is used here to refer to individuals racially categorized as Black, Latino, Asian, and Native American, who will in the near future no longer comprise less than 50 percent of the population in many major U.S. cities. Additionally, with present and increasing racial segregation, most residents do not live as a 'minority' in their community, but rather reside near others with racial, if not ethnic, similarity. Furthermore, the term 'minoritized' infers an action, a deliberate move that pushes and sustains a hierarchy of power status and social opportunity. Rather than a passive reality, it connotes motive and responsibility.

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